West Fork Chattooga River Watershed Survey



- Habitat and Fish Summary for Spring 1993 -



Southern Research Station
Coldwater Fisheries Research Unit
and
Center for Aquatic Technology Transfer

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United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service Southern Research Station - Coldwater Fisheries Unit

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Forward

This report contains a summary of basinwide fish habitat and fish population surveys conducted in the West Fork Chattooga watershed during the Spring 1993. It is the first major product resulting from a five year study designed to investigate trout production in selected Appalachian stream basins. Habitat surveys were conducted in Spring 1989 and 1993, and fish surveys were conducted every Spring and Fall between 1989 and 1993. This report will be updated periodically as information collected during previous years and seasons is analyzed and incorporated. We thank our cooperators, the US Forest Service-National Forest System, National Park Service - Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Clemson University, North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, Georgia and South Carolina Departments of Natural Resources, the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, and the Chattooga and Rabun Chapters of Trout Unlimited, whose enthusiastic participation and patience over the years made this study possible.

Background

Self-sustaining populations of wild trout have high recreational and aesthetic value in the mountainous regions of the southeastern United States. To meet the high angler demand for wild trout, many streams in the states of Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia are managed to support populations of one or more of the three salmonid species, rainbow trout Oncorhynchus mykiss, brown trout Salmo trutta, and brook trout Salvelinus fontinalis without artificial stocking. Other streams are stocked either to supplement low natural production of harvestable size trout or, where habitat conditions during some part of the year are inadequate for trout, to provide a seasonal (typically spring and fall) fishery.

Trout populations that support stream fisheries without supplemental stocking are very appealing to budget and quality conscious resource managers. Trout hatcheries are expensive to build and maintain, and many anglers believe that hatchery fish are "inferior" compared to their wild cousins. In contrast, trout populations maintained by natural reproduction cost little and yield wild fish that many anglers prize.

Unfortunately, because of over exploitation and habitat degradation, many streams in the southeast are apparently unable to support significant populations of wild trout. Past or present human land use, in particular removal of riparian vegetation by logging, livestock grazing, and road building, have caused changes in a variety of habitat characteristics including water temperature and overall water quality, type and quantity of sediment, instream cover (especially large woody debris), and food supplies. The restoration and protection of trout habitats depends on our ability to understand and eventually manipulate these and other factors that influence trout production.

Although there have been no comprehensive, long term studies, trout production is perceived by many fishery managers to be lower in southeastern streams than in other parts of the country. Low production usually is attributed to a single factor, such as increased temperature, sedimentation, or loss of instream cover. But production may be influenced by interactions among factors or by seasonal changes in the relative importance of individual factors. Streams that support self-sustaining trout

populations must meet the demands of all life history stages. Water quantity and quality (dissolved oxygen, pH, temperature, etc.), habitat, and food must be both within the acceptable range and available at the appropriate time for successful egg and embryo incubation, summer and winter juvenile rearing, adult maintenance, and spawning.

The overall purpose of this study was to investigate aspects of trout production ecology in the Southeast. The range of trout production has not been adequately documented and the relations of specific habitat features (e.g. large woody debris loading, habitat unit size and complexity, substrate composition, etc.) and biological interactions (e.g. variations in annual recruitment, competition with other fish species) to production are not well understood. We are assessing the influence on trout production of these and other factors such as annual climatic variation, season, and within-basin habitat variability by investigating the habitat use and population characteristics of trout in a cross-section of streams in Southern Appalachian watersheds.

Research sites were selected to encompass a broad range of conditions (e.g. amount of LWD, proportion of sediment in different size categories, size of habitat unit, number of non-salmonid fish species, etc.). Specific attributes (e.g. growth, production) of trout populations were measured during spring and fall in these streams. Particular emphasis was placed on identifying relationships between fish populations and features of physical habitat and on evaluating the effects of biological processes such as recruitment and effect of other fish species (potential competitors) on production estimates.

In this report we provide a summary of Spring 1993 habitat conditions, trout distribution and density, and length frequency of trout in 10 West Fork Chattooga River watershed streams in North Carolina and Georgia. Future products will include identification of specific factors that appear to control or limit salmonid production and establishment of a long term data base for estimating habitat and trout production relationships. Pertinent research findings will be published in the scientific and popular literature.

Study Area

The headwaters of the West Fork Chattooga River originate largely in the mountains of North Carolina on lands managed either by the Nantahala National Forest or private individuals. From there until its confluence with the Main Stem Chattooga River, the 130 km of first through fourth order channels traverse a patchwork of land uses including portions of Gerogia's Chattahoochee National Forest. Although land management along the West Fork Chattooga River is influenced by a variety of both public and private interests, most of the public land surrounding the West Fork Chattooga is now included within the boundaries of the Chattooga Wild and Scenic River corridor.

The pattern of historical land use in the Chattooga drainage is similar to that for much of the southern Appalachian Mountains. Land clearing and logging of the rugged, mountainous terrain did not begin until the late 1800s and involved both overland and water transportation of logs. Road building continued well into the late 1960s, and a large proportion of the coarse sand bedload in Overflow Creek, a major branch of the West Fork Chattooga River, has been attributed to road cuts in the highly erodible, mica-schist based soils (Monte Seehorn, personal communication). Present and future land use within the Wild and Scenic River corridor is limited to recreation. Other parts of the drainage in both public and private ownership (particularly in the Blue Valley area of North Carolina) will continue to be developed for personal use, timber harvest, and other commercial enterprise.

Ten streams in the West Fork Chattooga watershed were chosen for extensive sampling. The study streams were 1) Tottery Pole Creek, 2) Metcalf Branch, 3) Smith Branch, 4) Holcomb Creek, 5) Addie Branch, 6) Ammons Creek, 7) Overflow Creek, 8) East Fork Overflow Creek, 9) Abes Creek, and 10) West Fork Overflow Creek (Figure 1). One riffle-pool combination was also studied in West Fork Chattooga River (Figure 1).

Survey Techniques

Habitat Survey - For the BVET (Basinwide Visual Estimation Techniques) we identified four habitat types; pools, glides, riffles, and cascades (Dolloff et.al 1993). Each habitat unit occupied at least 3 m²

in area; areas smaller than 3 m² were included with the closest adjacent habitat unit. Dominant substrate (substrate in one of nine classes covering the greatest proportion of the wetted stream bottom; Table 1) and counts of pieces of large woody debris (LWD) in each of seven size classes (Table 1) were recorded in each habitat unit sampled.

The BVET for habitat inventory consisted of two phases, estimation and verification (Hankin and Reeves 1988; Dolloff et al. 1993). During the first phase, the watershed was stratified into reaches based on natural features (e.g. change in stream order or change in gradient) or other criteria selected by the observer to ensure repeatability or to meet other specific objectives. Also during phase one, the stream was stratified by habitat types and areas and other features for each type were visually estimated. During the second phase of the BVET, we verified and calibrated our estimates of habitat characteristics through measurements made with more accurate methods on a subsample of the total habitat units.

BVET surveys started at stream confluences and progressed upstream to the end of the respective stratum. Habitat type, distance from start points, estimated area, average and maximum depths, dominant substrate, and LWD counts were recorded for every habitat unit in the stratum.

Habitat units were sequentially numbered by habitat type. Distance (to 0.1 m) to each unit was recorded as the length along the thalweg as determined by hip-chain measurement. Average and maximum depths were estimated based on multiple gauges with a depth rod marked into 5 cm increments. Areas were accurately measured with a meter tape in a subset of units (about 20% of all pools and glides, and 10% of all riffles and cascades) to account for the bias of visual estimates. Areas were calculated as the product of length and average width. Separate calibrations were calculated for pools, riffles, and cascades within each stream stratum and watershed. Estimates of habitat area and associated variances were calculated for each habitat type and stream stratum using equations found in Dolloff et al. (1993).

Fish Survey - The BVET for fish population census also consisted of two phases, estimation and verification (Hankin and Reeves 1988; Dolloff et al. 1993). During the first phase, underwater observations were made by divers equipped with face-masks and snorkels. Divers entered habitat units (selected during phase two of the habitat survey - 20% of all pools and glides, and 10% of all riffles and cascades) and proceeded slowly upstream identifying and counting all trout and other fish species.

During the second phase of the fish survey we used multipass deletions with 700 volt AC backpack electrofishing equipment to verify and calibrate the diver counts. About 10% of phase one fish sampling units (one of every 10 habitat units searched by divers) were selected systematically for multipass depletions. Diver counts of fish in each habitat type were corrected by calibration ratios: number observed by divers\ depletion estimates. Estimates of total fish abundance and associated variances were calculated for each salmonid species using equations found in Dolloff et al. (1993). All fish captured during the two- or three-pass depletions were identified, weighed (g), measured (mm), and returned to the approximate location of capture.

Results

Habitat Survey - Total area of each habitat type was estimated for each of the Spring 1993 study streams using correction factors (Q) that ranged from 0.8 to 1.1 (Table 2). Pool-like habitat (pools and glides) constituted the greatest proportion of the total surface area in all study streams (Table 2).

In general, pools were deeper than all other habitat types and glides deeper than riffles and cascades. Depth in all habitat types, however, was highly variable (Appendix D-[1-10]).

Sand was the dominant substratum in the pools and glides of 80% and 60% of the stream surveyed. Substrate in cascades was primarily bedrock and in riffles cobble (Appendix E-[1-10]).

Most of the LWD consisted of pieces < 10cm in diameter. Only Holcomb Creek, Addie Branch, Ammons Creek, and Overflow Creek showed considerable LWD loading of pieces in the larger size classes (Appendix F-[1-10]). Fish Survey - The trout community in the West Fork Chattooga watershed was composed of brown trout, rainbow trout, and brook trout which were observed in 36%, 73%, and 55% of the streams surveyed, respectively. Brook trout were most frequent in the upper sections of the study streams. Brook trout were sympatric with brown trout in only two streams, East and West Fork Overflow Creeks, but sympatric with rainbow trout in five streams. Apparently, only Smith Branch contains an allopatric brook trout population. Only one rainbow trout and one brown trout were captured in the West Fork Chattooga River sample.

In general, trout numbers were relatively low in the West Fork Chattooga watershed in Spring 1993 (Table 3). Thus, there were often too few trout observed and captured, either by species or by habitat type, to produce reliable estimates (Table 3). We also estimated trout density whenever possible. Because of the extreme variation in trout abundance, however, all of these estimates should be viewed as indices rather than true densities. Trout densities (number per 100 m²) at the river reach level (estimated total fish abundance/estimated total habitat area X 100) ranged from 0 to 2.5/ 100 m² for brown trout, 0 to 2.3/ 100 m² for rainbow trout, and 0 to 1.5/ 100 m² for brook trout (Table 3). Summaries of the fish surveys are presented in Appendices to this report.

Eleven non-salmonid species were also observed during Spring 1993; seven of which were captured in West Fork Chattooga River. Species (other than trout) and approximate ranges are given in Table 4. More complete summaries of population characteristics and distribution of non-salmonid fish will be included in a future report.

User's Guide for Appendix

Stream summaries are organized by sub-basin: downstream to upstream. Appendix numbers correspond with stream numbers given in Figure 1. Each stream summary contains seven graphs, respectively:

Appendix A. Length frequency of all trout species captured during electrofishing surveys.

Appendix B. Distribution and relative abundance (number / 100 m²) of all trout by species in each stream. Densities are based on diver counts. Habitat units where divers did not see trout are denoted by horizontal marks on the x-axis. Age 0+ fish (young-of-year) are labeled YOY.

Appendix C. Box plots of the surface area of all habitats inventoried in each stream. Visual estimates of surface area were corrected by multiplying all estimates by a calibration ratio (Q of Hankin and Reeves 1988). The box encloses the middle 50% of the observations, the capped lines below and above the box represents the 10% and 90% quantiles, respectively, and the solid line in the box represents the median.

Appendix D. Box plots of the maximum depth of all habitats inventoried in each stream. The box encloses the middle 50% of the observations, the capped lines below and above the box represents the 10% and 90% quantiles, respectively, and the solid line in the box represents the median.

Appendix E. Dominant substrate occurrence by habitat type in each stream. Bars represent frequency (percent) and dots represent cumulative percent.

Appendix F. Pieces of large woody debris per kilometer of stream by size class in each stream. Bars represent frequency (percent) and dots represent cumulative percent.

Appendix G. Distribution and total abundance of large woody debris in each stream. Distribution and abundance of LWD 5, LWD 6, and rootwads represent the largest size classes of woody debris and are most likely to remain in the stream channels and influence habitat quality.

Literature Cited

- Dolloff, C. A., D. G. Hankin, and G. H. Reeves. 1993. Basinwide estimation of habitat and fish populations in streams. General Technical Report SE-83. Asheville, North Carolina: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Southeastern Forest Experiment Station. 25 pp.
- Hankin, D. G. and G. H. Reeves. 1988. Estimating total fish abundance and total habitat area in small streams based on visual estimation methods. Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences. 45: 834-844.

Figures

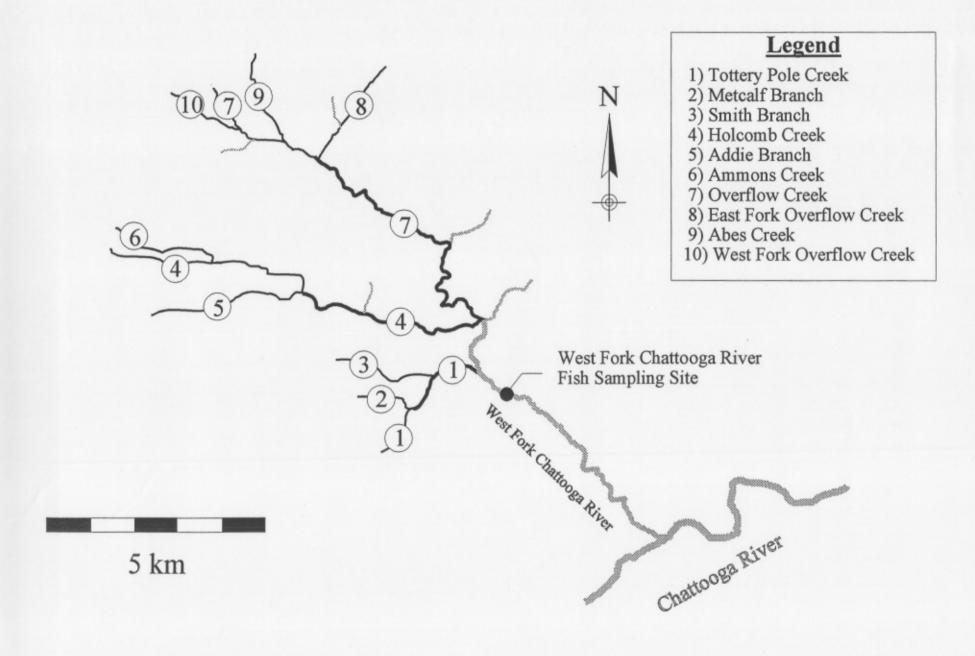


Figure 1. West Fork Chattooga watershed. Numbers represent sample streams (names given in Legend) and correspond with stream numbers given in Appendices. Streams highlighted gray were not included in this study.

Tables

Table 1. Criteria for substrate and large woody debris (LWD) classifications.

S	UBSTRATE	LWD SIZE					
Class	Diameter	Class	Length	Diameter			
organic debris		T	≥1;<5 m	5-10cm			
clay		Ţ 2	≥1; <5 m	10-50cm			
silt		₹ 3	≥1; <5 m	> 50cm			
sand	silt- 2mm	4	≥ 5m	5-10cm			
small gravel	2-10mm	9 5	≥ 5m	10-50cm			
large gravel	1-10cm	← 6	≥ 5m	> 50cm			
cobble	11-30cm	€ 47	root wads				
boulder	30cm						
bedrock							

Table 2. Total number of habitat units surveyed (N), number of units measured (n), correction factor (\mathbb{Q}), estimated total habitat area (\mathbb{M}), estimated variance of the estimated total habitat area ($\mathbb{V}(\mathbb{M})$), and 95% confidence intervals (C.L) for the estimated habitat area for West Fork Chattooga study streams. Sub-basin are given in bold font and length of stream surveyed is given parenthetically.

Stream	Туре	N	n	Q	M	Ŷ(Ń)	95% CI
Tottery Pole Creek	Cascade	48	5	0.9	1301.1	3081.4	± 154.1
(3129.3 m)	Riffle	72	10	1.1	2893.6	146135.8	± 865.4
	Pool/Glide	353	68	1.0	9691.9	96974.3	± 621.5
Metcalf Branch	Cascade	41	7	1.1	1982.3	20665.4	± 351.8
(1958.4 m)	Riffle	32	5	1.0	788.9	3574.0	± 165.0
	Pool/Glide	183	36	1.0	5489.2	9631.4	± 199.2
Smith Branch	Cascade	10	0	NA	NA	NA	NA
(811.0 m)	Riffle	31	4	0.91	872.2	3067.3	± 176.2
	Pool/Glide	87	18	1.1	1635.0	8231.3	± 191.4
Holcomb Creek	Cascade	43	5	1.0	2500.8	7716.0	± 243.8
(8925.7 m)	Riffle	62	5	0.9	5089.8	42794.1	± 574.3
	Pool/Glide	275	48	1.0	53742.3	1569053.6	± 2519.8
Addie Branch	Cascade	43	4	1.0	133.3	18.8	± 13.8
(2241.0 m)	Riffle	50	6	0.9	169.8	303.7	± 44.8
	Pool/Glide	212	41	1.0	6669.0	56523.8	± 480.5
Ammons Creek	Cascade	21	2	1.0	134.4	8.6	± 37.4
(1355.7 m)	Riffle	24	3	1.1	118.4	134.0	<u>+</u> 49.8
	Pool/Glide	93	17	0.9	4031.0	66594.6	± 547.1
Overflow Creek	Cascade	37	3	0.8	859.8	21274.7	± 627.6
(7900.8 m)	Riffle	56	5	1.0	2563.2	19494.8	± 387.6
	Pool/Glide	270	53	1.0	67390.9	234870.2	± 972.4
East Fork Overflow Creek	Cascade	58	6	1.0	2744.5	2876.3	± 137.9
(4053.1 m)	Riffle	70	8	1.0	3682.4	10873.3	± 246.2
	Pool/Glide	230	47	1.1	13902.3	247367.3	± 1001.1
Abes Creek	Cascade	34	4	1.0	756.3	10465.8	± 325.5
(1731.4 m)	Riffle	54	6	1.1	1860.8	1748.4	± 107.5
	Pool/Glide	179	36	1.0	3292.4	23407.8	±310.6

Table 2. Continued

Stream	Туре	N	n	Q	M	Ŷ(Ń)	95% CI
West Fork Overflow Creek	Cascade	22	2	1.0	695.0	1507.0	± 493.2
(2612.3 m)	Riffle	29	3	0.8	1817.0	34619.9	± 800.6
	Pool/Glide	92	19	0.9	8875.9	299455.1	±1149.7

21.6 miles 21.6 miles

Table 3. Habitat units sampled for fish in West Fork Chattooga study streams. Correction factor (\Re), estimated total trout abundance (\Im), estimated variance of the total trout abundance (\Im), 95% confidence intervals (C.L) for the total trout abundance, and density (number/ 100 m²). Rainbow Trout = RBT, Brown Trout = BNT, Brook Trout = BKT, not applicable = NA and *. Sub-basins are given in bold font and hipchain distance for Holcomb Creek reaches are given parenthetically.

Stream	Species	Habitat Type	Units Snorkeled	Units Shocked	Ř	Ý	Ŷ(Ŷ)	95% CI	Density
Tottery Pole Creek	NA	Cascade	10	2	*	*	*	*	*
Metcalf Branch	NA	Riffle	17	8		*	*	*	*
Smith Branch (combined)	BKT	Pool/Glide	107	15	1.429	251.9	8558.6	± 198.4	1.5
Holcomb Creek (Lower)	NA	Cascade	1	0	*	*		*	*
(0 - 6027.4 m)	NA	Riffle	3	1	*	*	*	*	*
	RBT	Pool/Glide	31	3	0.667	334.5	44544.7	± 908.0	0.9
	NA	Cascade	1	0		*	*		*
	NA	Riffle	3	1	*		*		*
	BNT	Pool/Glide	31	3	3.000	929.0	81290.3	± 1226.9	2.5
Holcomb Creek (Upper)	NA	Cascade	2	1	*			*	*
(6027 - 8927.4)	NA	Riffle	3	3	*	*	*	*	*
	BKT	Pool/Glide	19	4	0.500	27.2	303.3	± 55.4	0.2
Addie Branch	NA	Cascade	0	0		*	*		*
	NA	Riffle	6	2	*	*	*		*
	NA	Pool/Glide	42	4	*		*		*

Table 3. Continued

Stream	Species	Туре	Units Dove	Units Shocked	Ř	Ý	Ŷ(Ŷ)	95% CI	Density
Ammons Creek	NA	Cascade	2	2		*		*	*
	NA	Riffle	3	3		*	*	*	*
	BKT	Pool/Glide	18	3	0.200	41.3	24273.7	± 670.4	1.0
Overflow Creek	NA	Cascade	0	0			*		*
	NA	Riffle	3	2	*	*	*		*
	RBT	Pool/Glide	54	4	0.964	1552.5	656792.0	± 2578.8	2.3
East Fork Overflow Creek	NA	Cascade	6	4	*	*		*	*
	NA	Riffle	8	3	*	*	*	*	*
	BNT	Pool/Glide	45	5	1.500	46.0	55261.3	± 652.6	0.3
	BKT	Cascade	6	4	2.000	19.3	377.0	± 61.7	0.7
	NA	Riffle	8	3	*	*	*	*	*
	BKT	Pool/Glide	45	5	1.000	122.7	456.4	± 76.3	0.9

Table 3. Continued

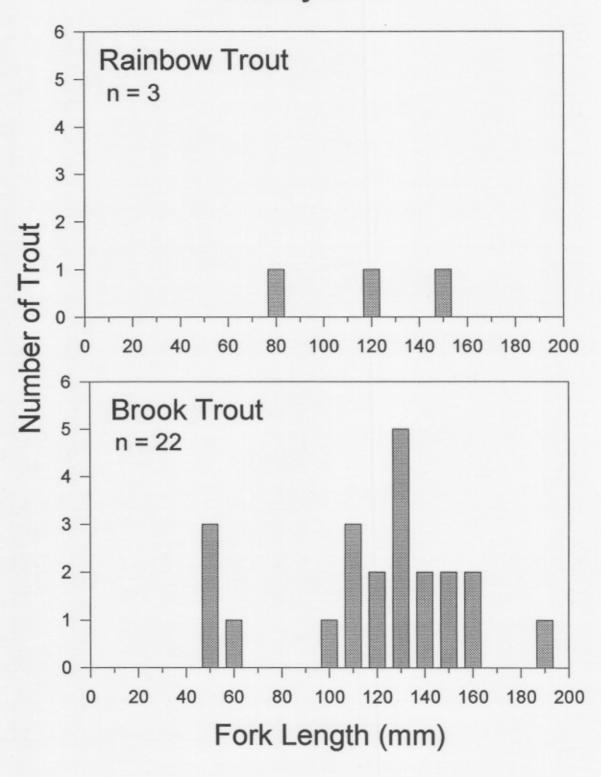
Stream	Species	Туре	Units Dove	Units Shocked	Ř	Ý	Ŷ(Ŷ)	95% CI	Density
Abes Creek	NA	Cascade	3	3	*	*	*	*	*
	NA	Riffle	6	3	*	*	*	*	*
	NA	Pool/Glide	35	4	٠	*	٠	*	*
West Fork Overflow Creek	BKT	Cascade	4	2	1.0	5.5	49.5	89.4	0.8
	RBT	Riffle	4	3	2.0	14.5	270.7	70.8	0.8
	BKT	Pool/Glide	18	6	1.000	25.6	63.0	20.4	0.3

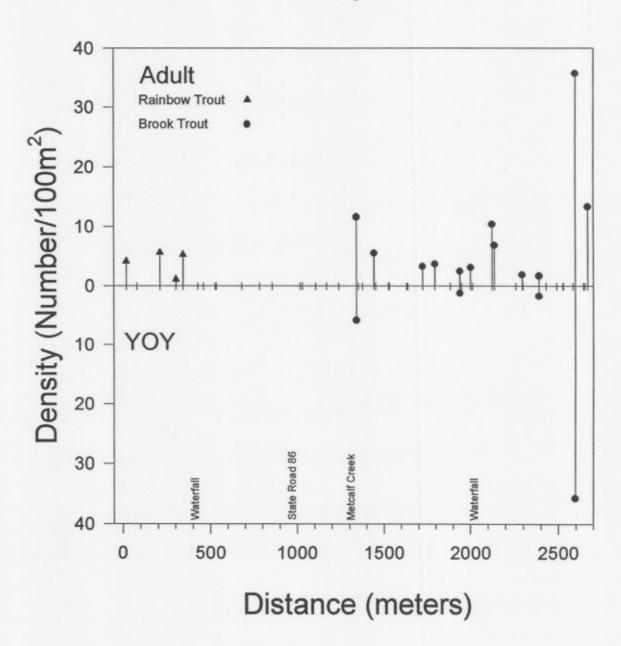
Table 4. Partial distribution of non-salmonid species in the West Fork Chattooga watershed. Distributions are based on diver observations and electrofishing surveys.

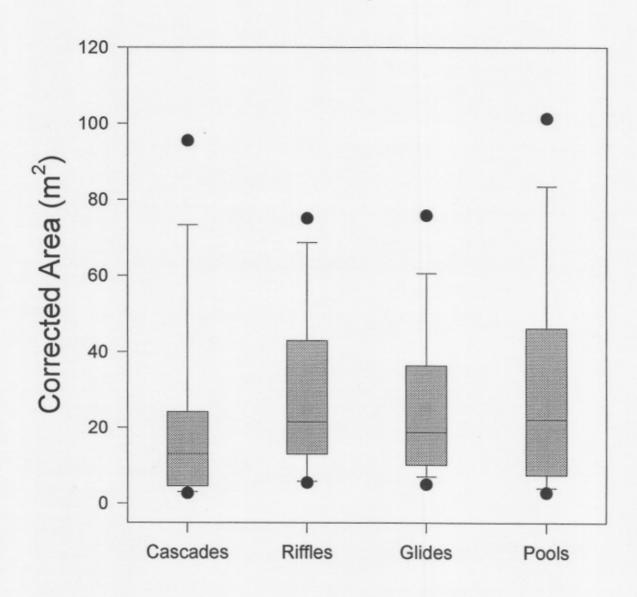
Stream	Common name	Scientific name	Stream kilometer
West Fork Chattooga River	Turquoise Darter	Etheostoma inscriptum	Figure 1
	Longnose Dace	Rhinichthys cataractae	
	Warpaint Shiner	Luxilus coccogenis	
	Mirror Shiner	Notropis spectrunculus	
	Yellowfin Shiner	N. Lutipinnis	
	Tennessee Shiner	N. Leuciodus	
	Striped Jumprock	Moxostoma rupiscartes	
Tottery Pole Creek	Blacknose Dace	Rhinichthys atratulus	0 - 0.02
	White Sucker	Catostomus commersoni	0 - 0.02
	Northern Hogsucker	Hypentelium nigricans	0 - 0.08
Overflow Creek	Blacknose Dace	Rhinichthys atratulus	0 - 0.35
	White Sucker	Catostomus commersoni	0 - 2.73
East Fork Overflow Creek	Redbreast Sunfish	Lepomis auritus	0 - 0.04
	Blacknose Dace	Rhinichthys atratulus	0 - 2.15

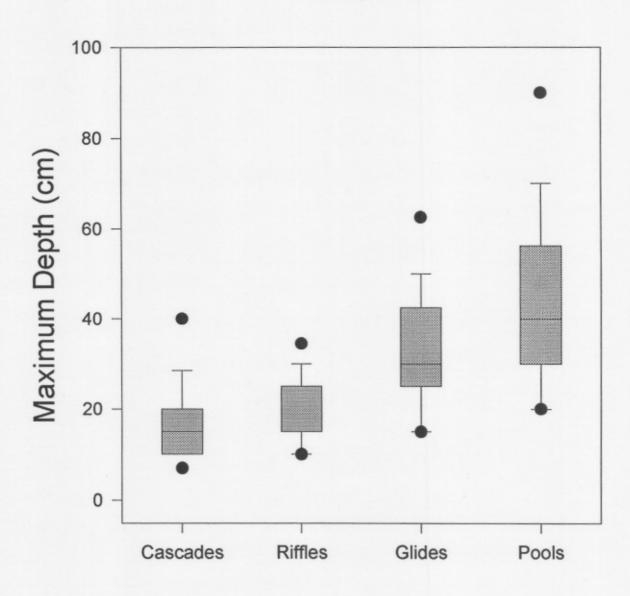
Appendix

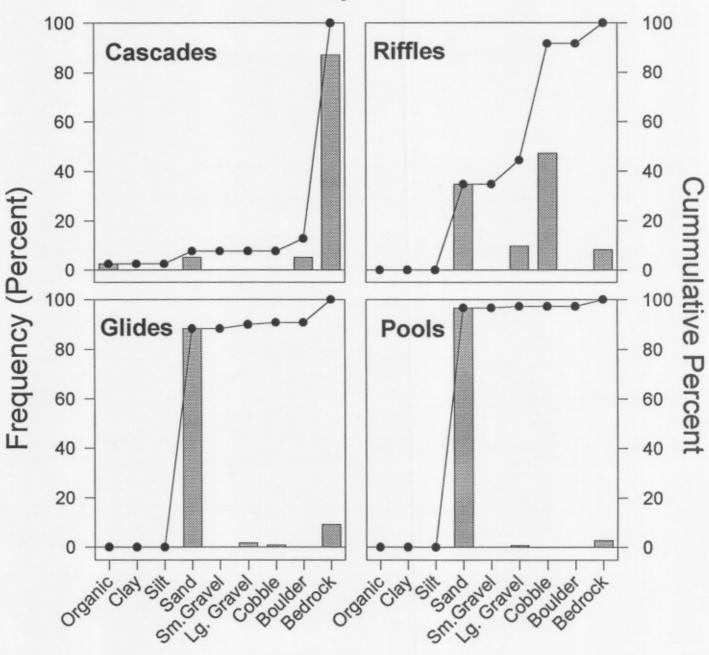
Tottery Pole Creek Basin

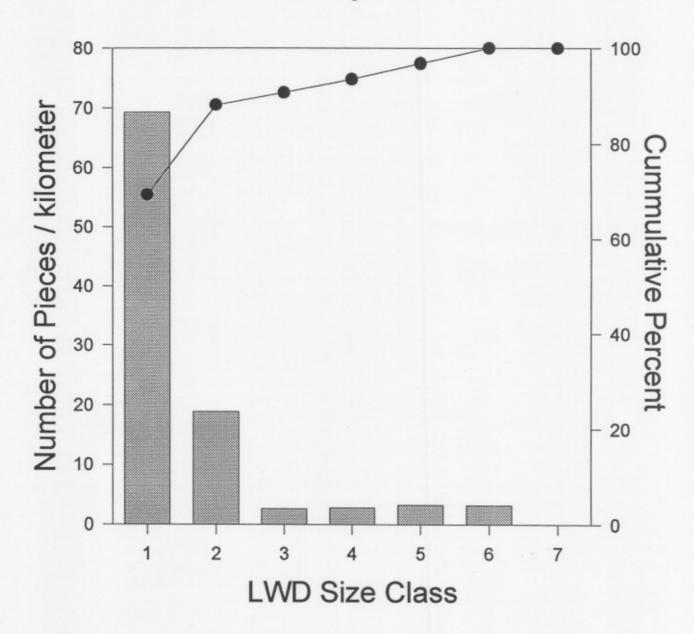


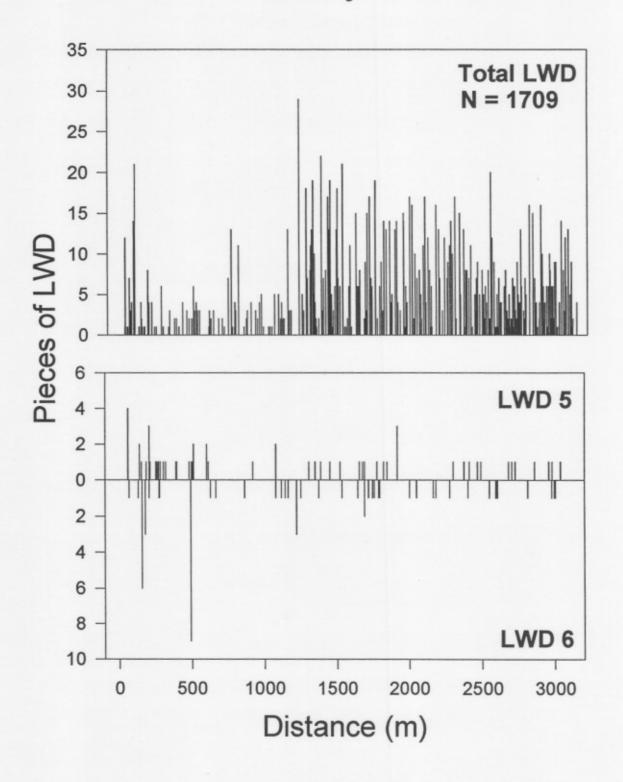


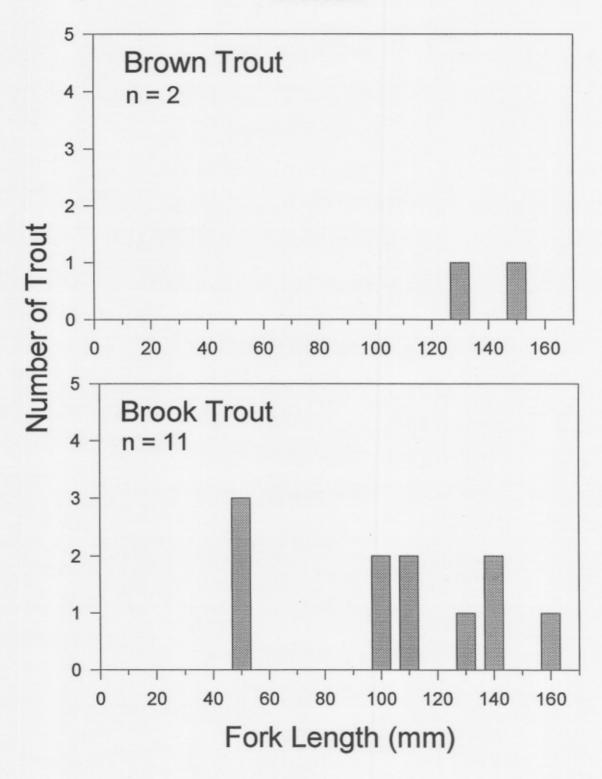


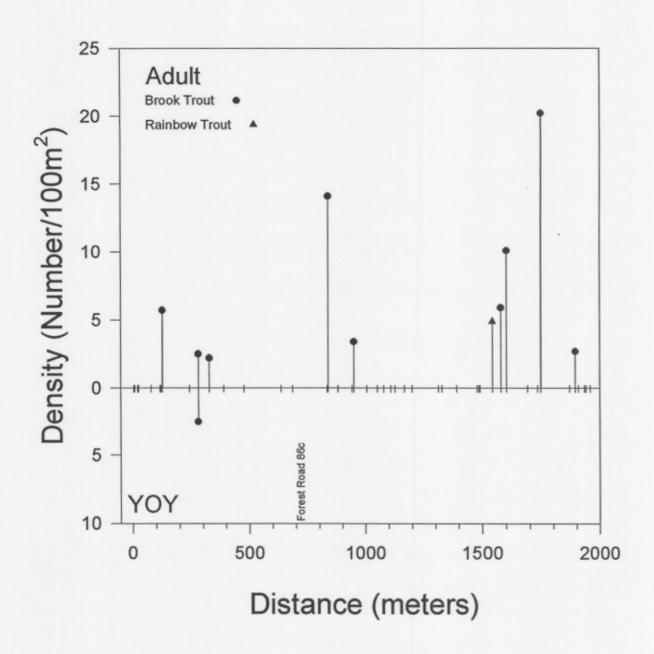


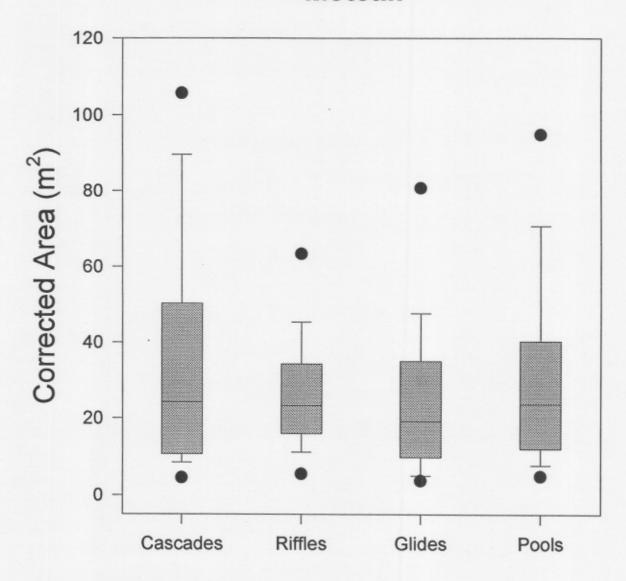


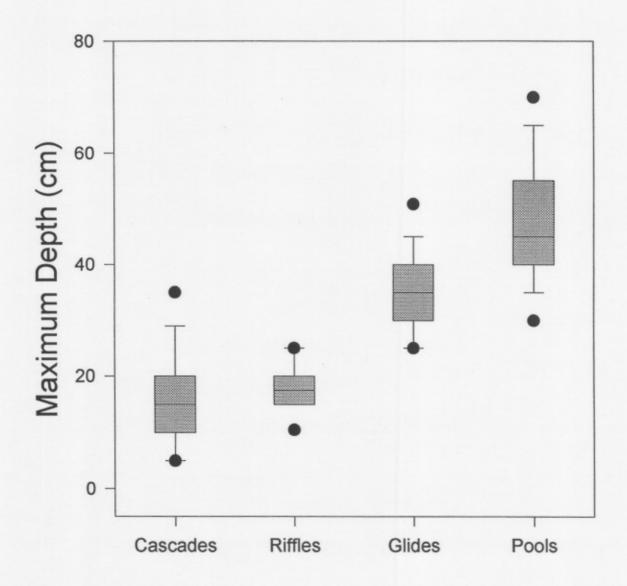


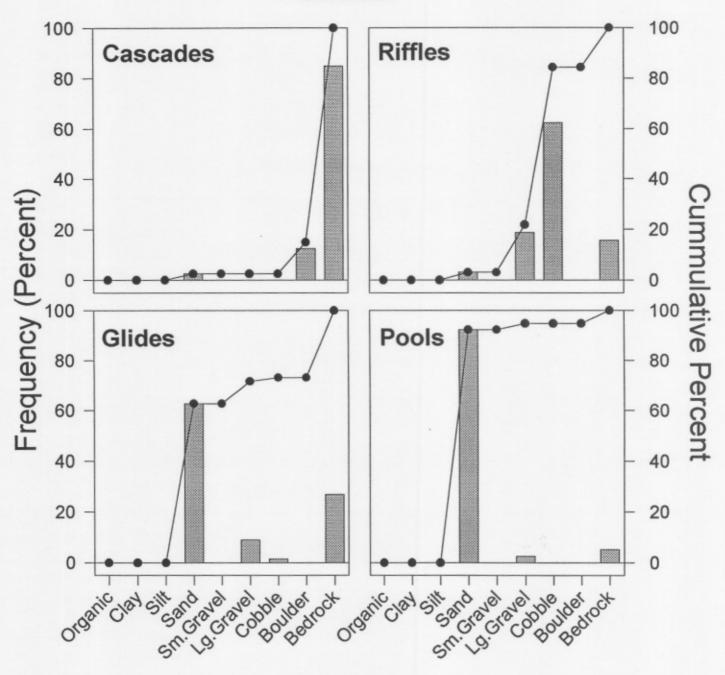


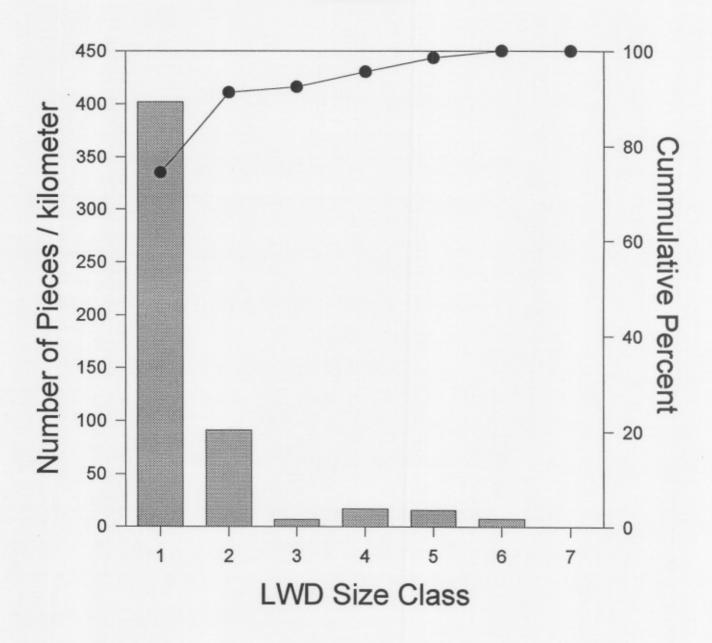


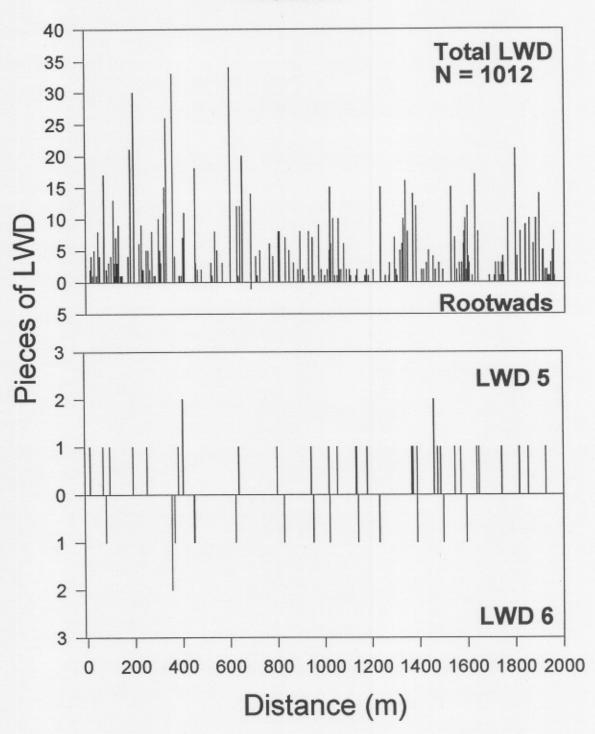


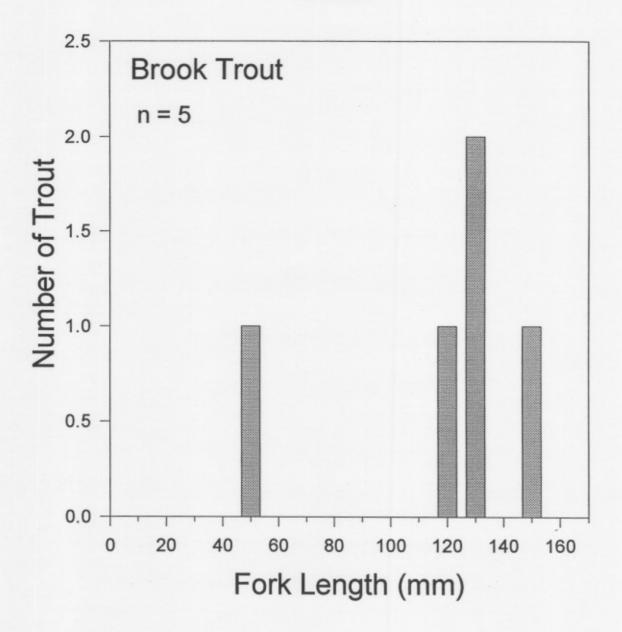


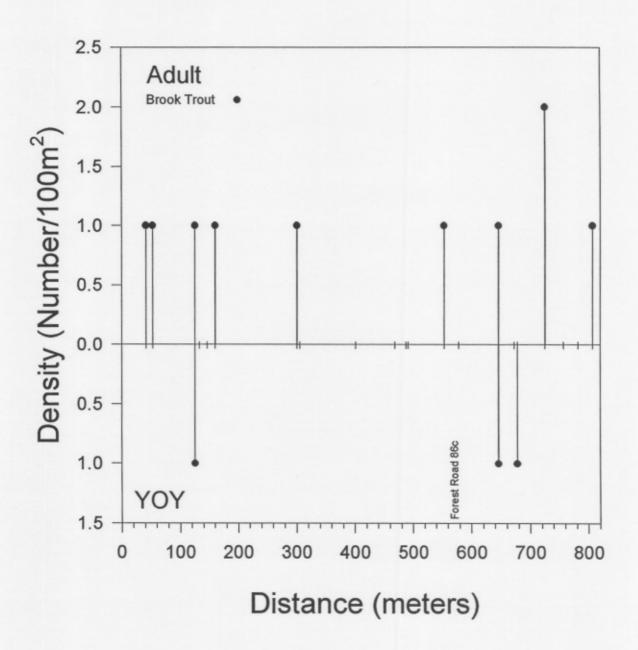


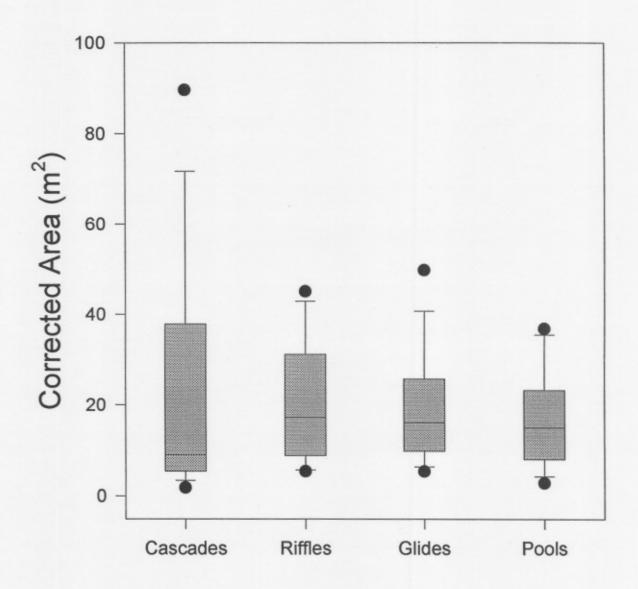


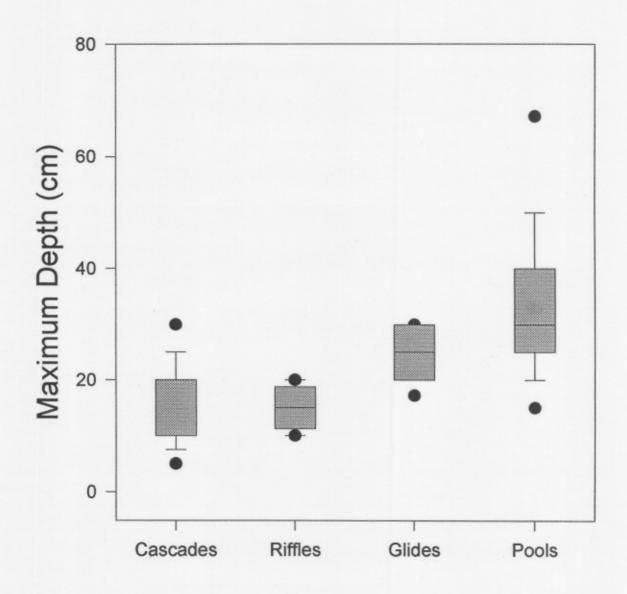


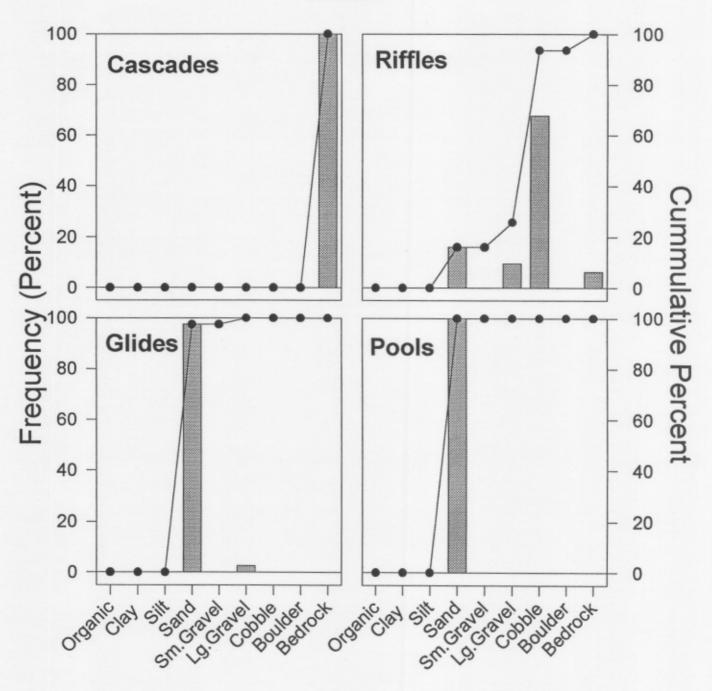




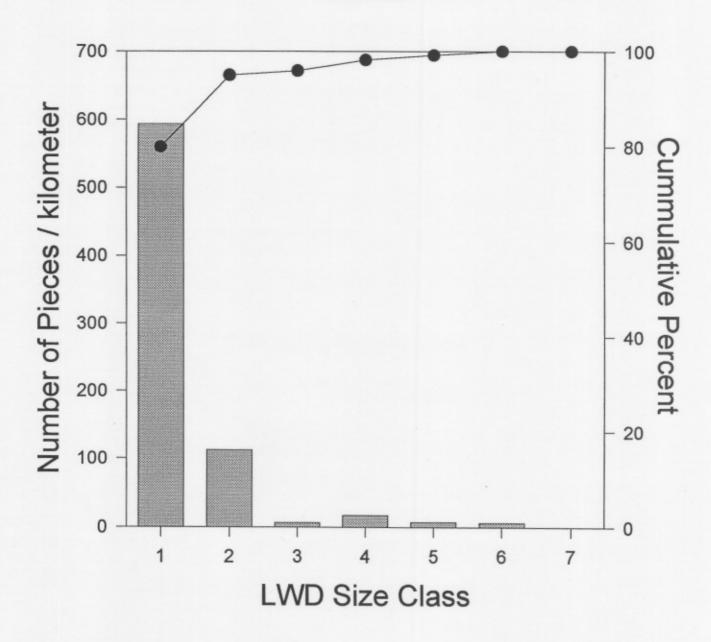


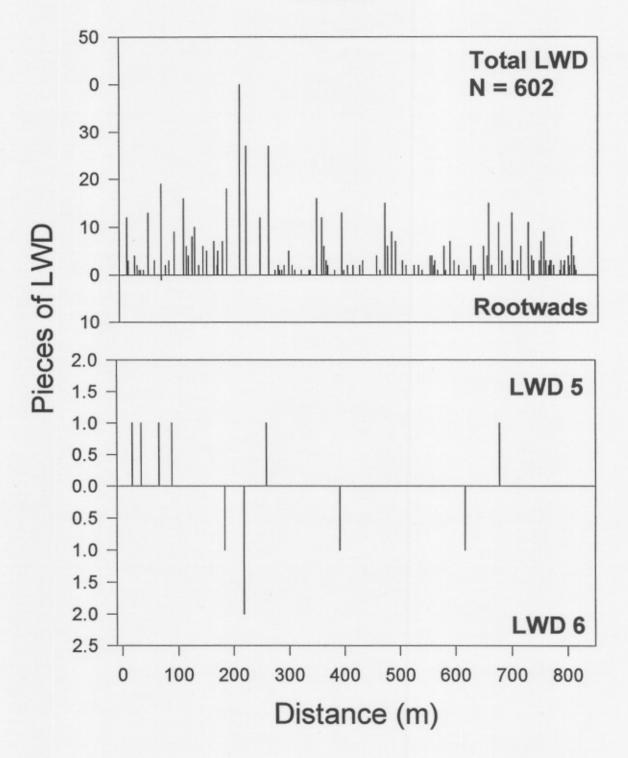




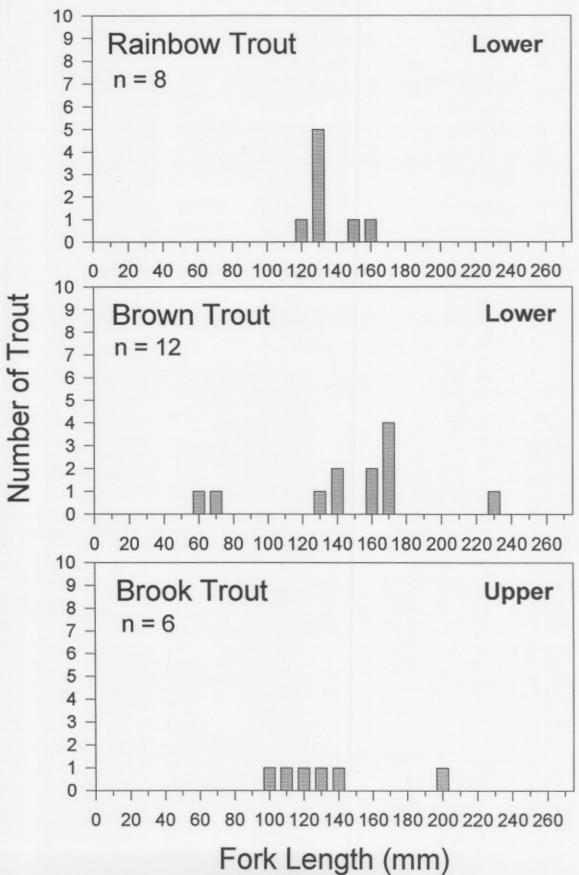


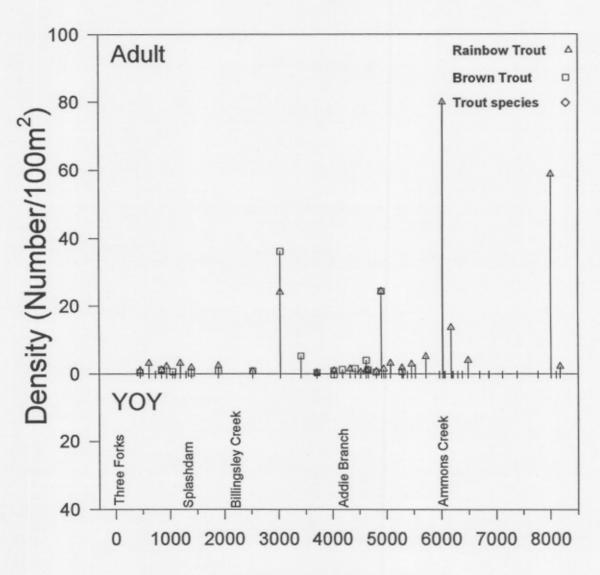




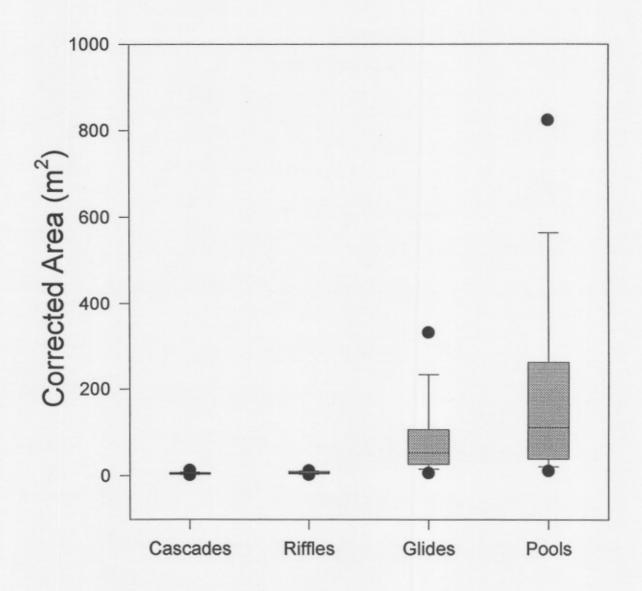


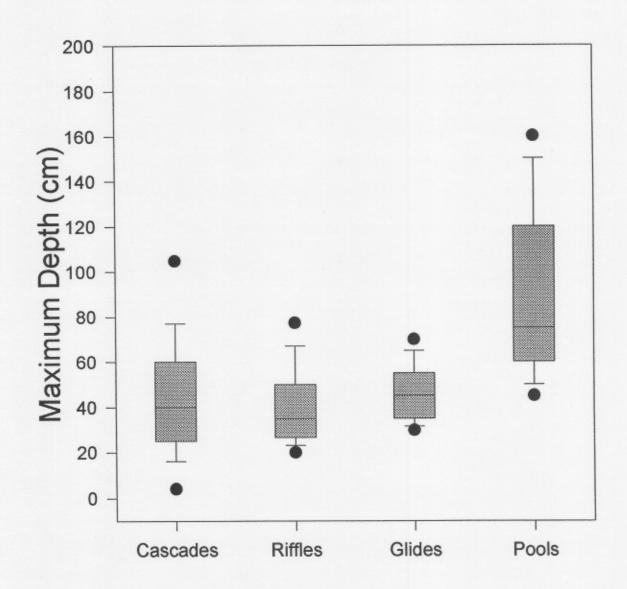
Holcomb Creek Basin

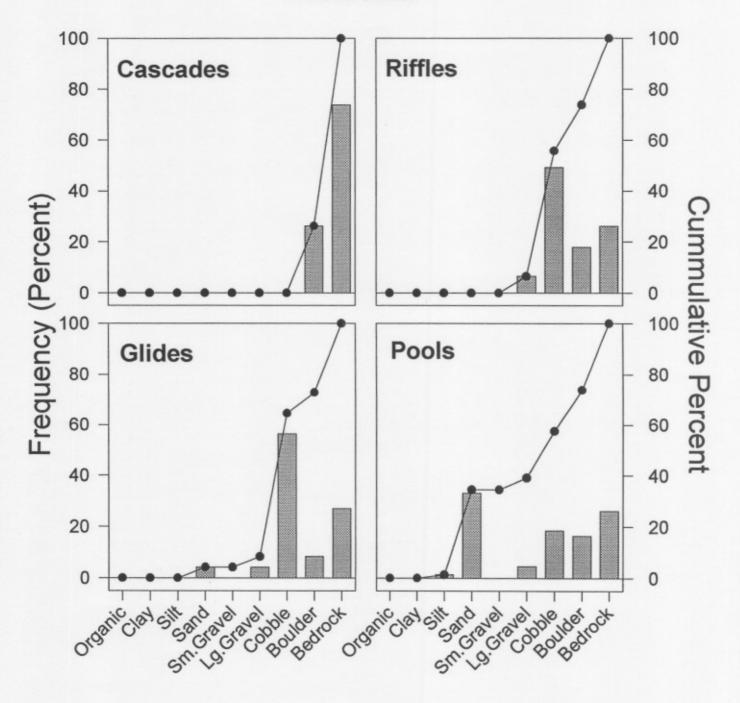


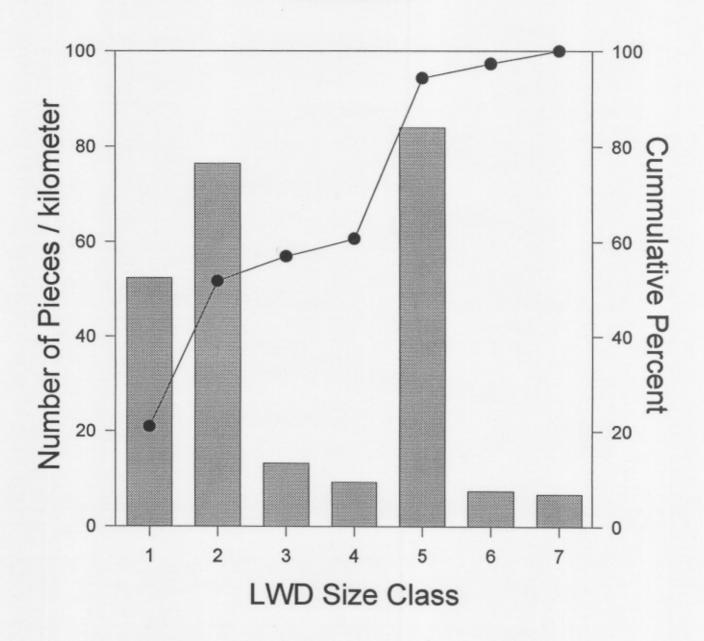


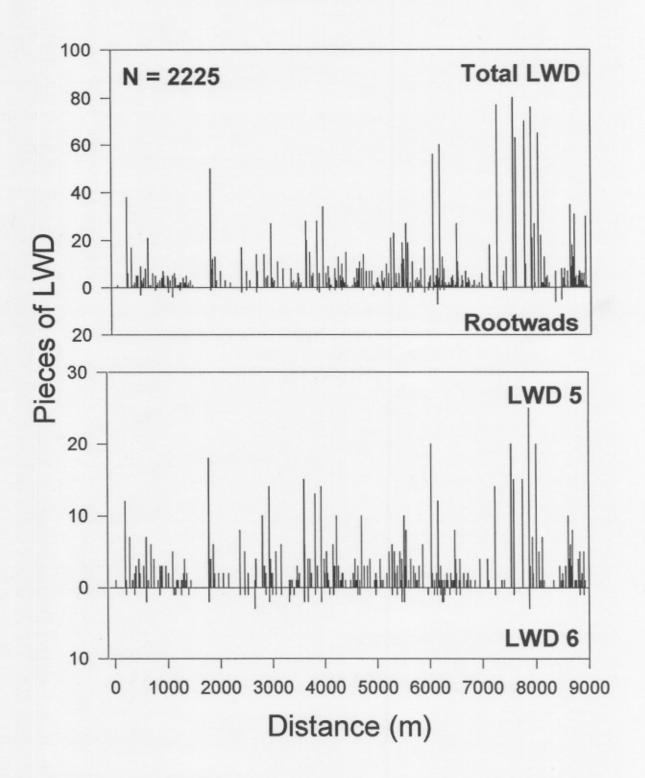
Distance (meters)

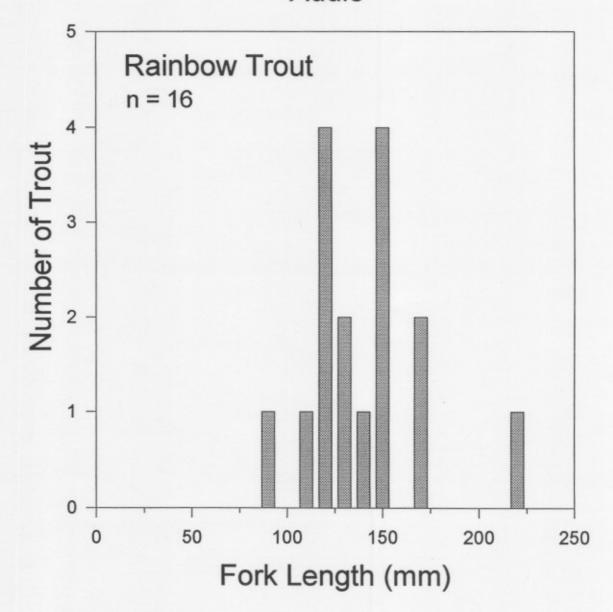


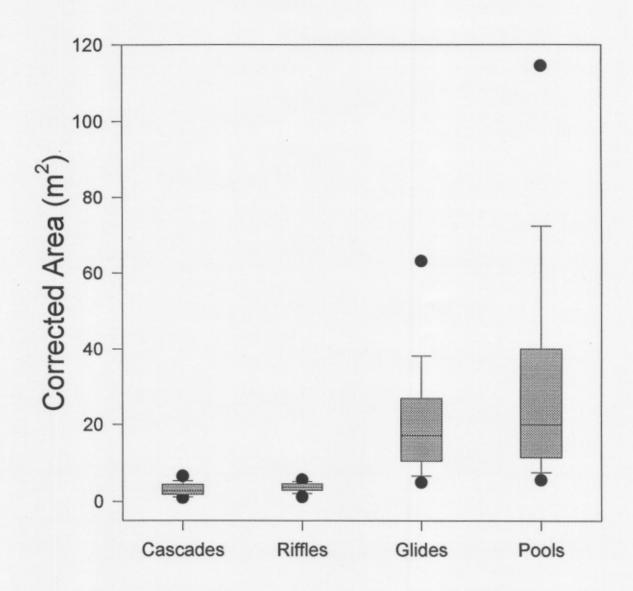


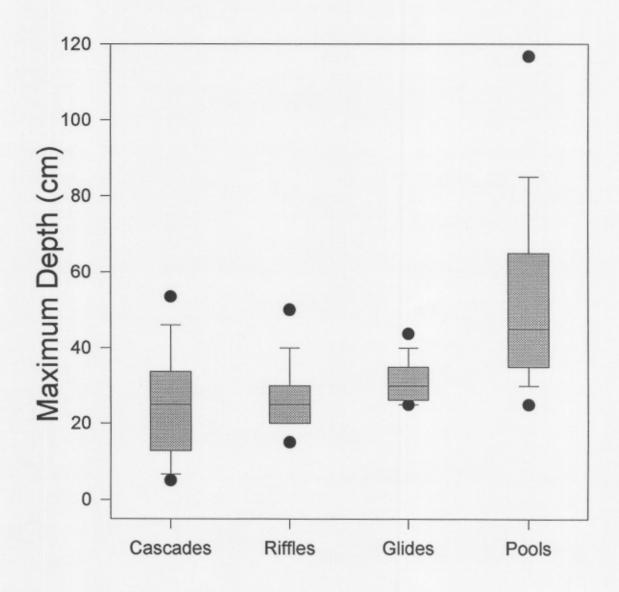


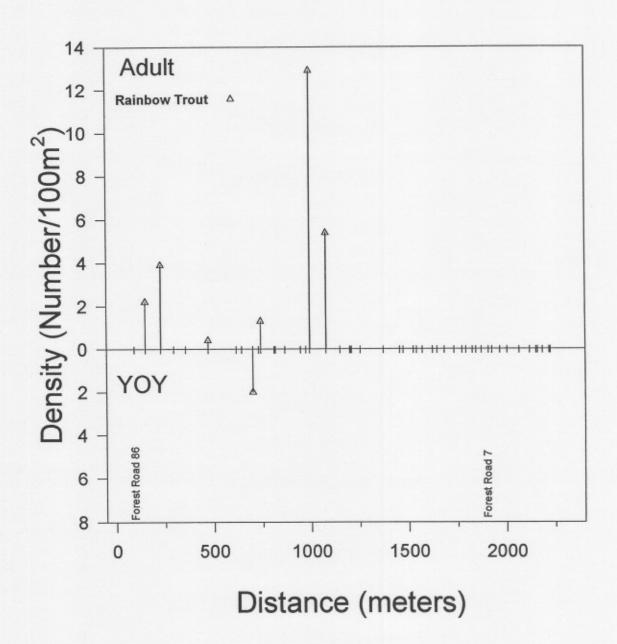


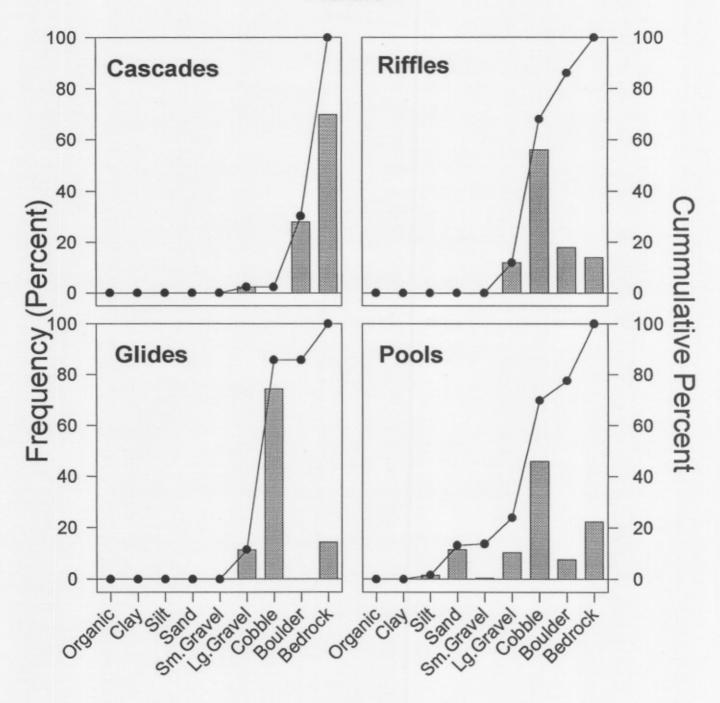


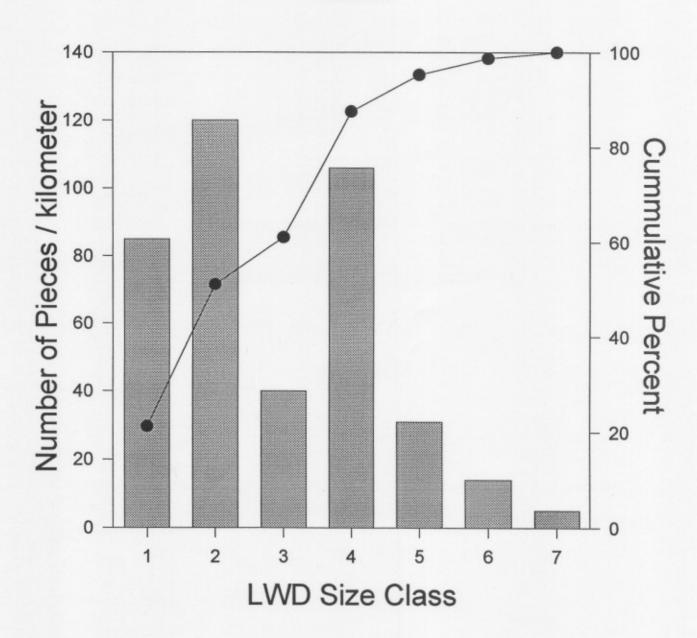


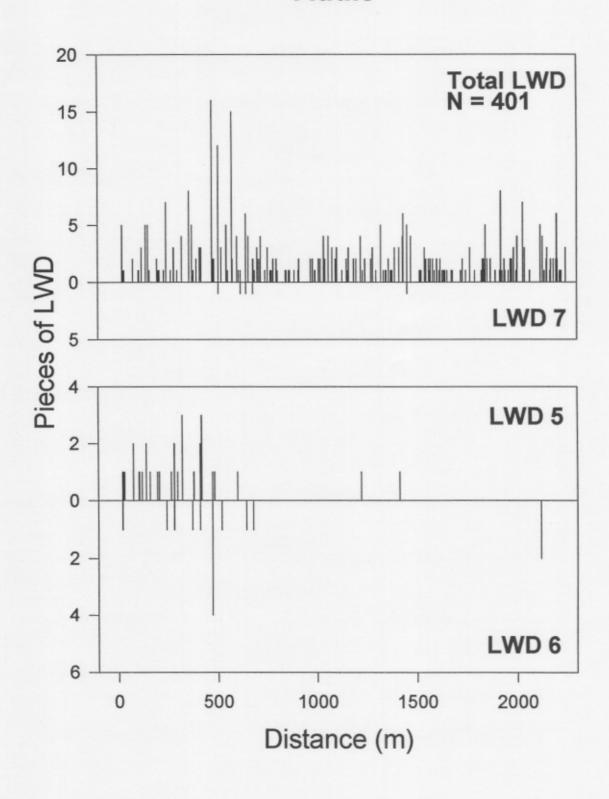


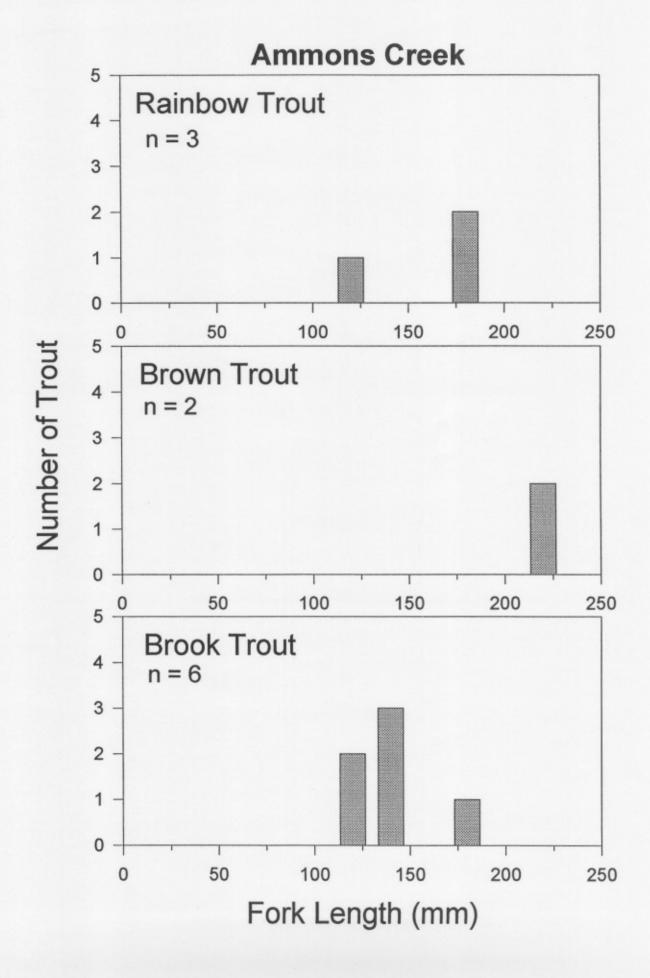


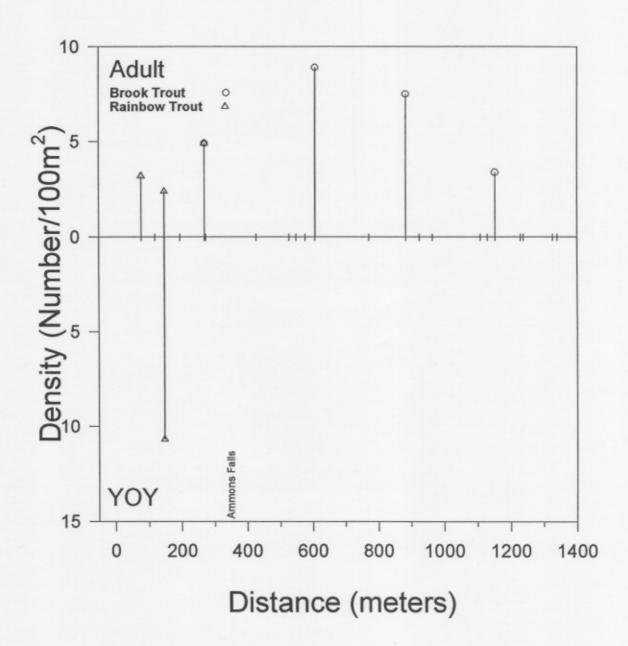


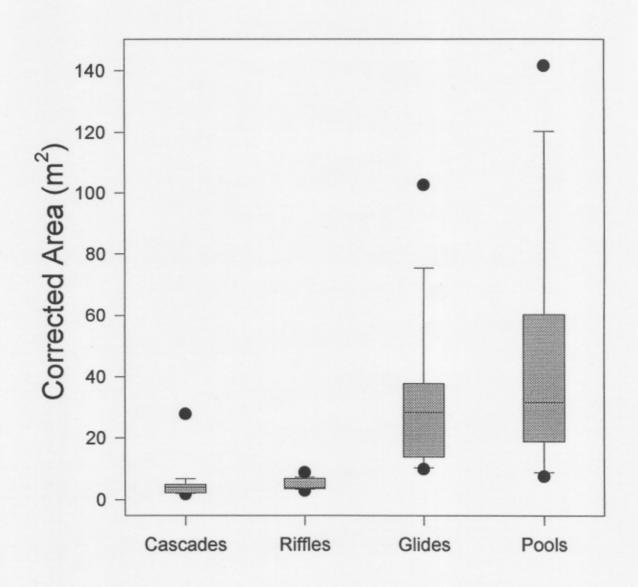


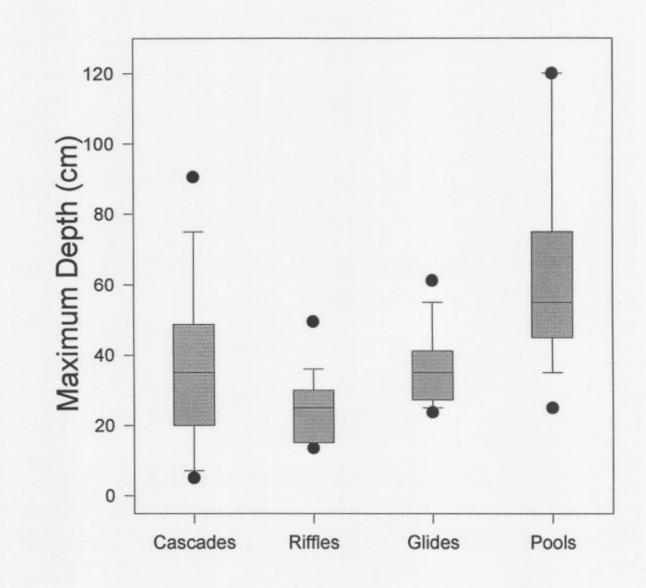


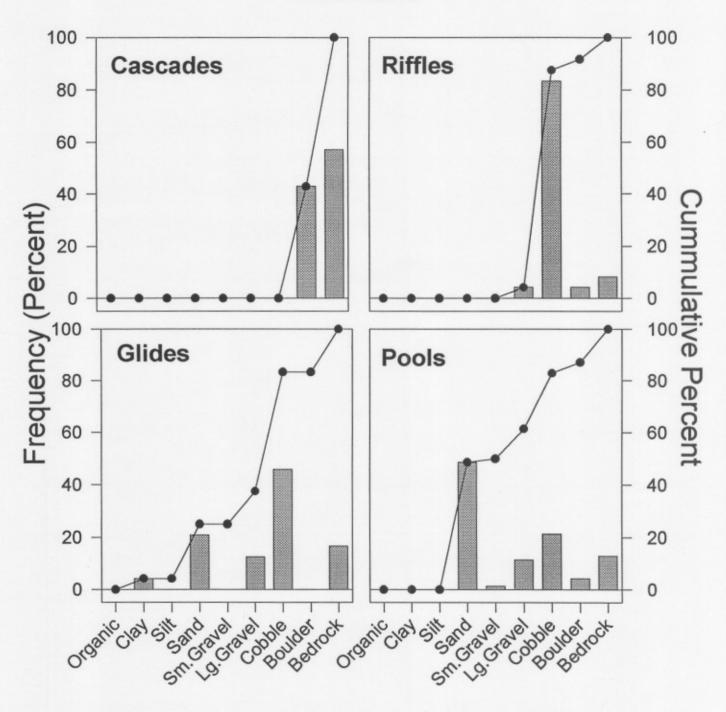


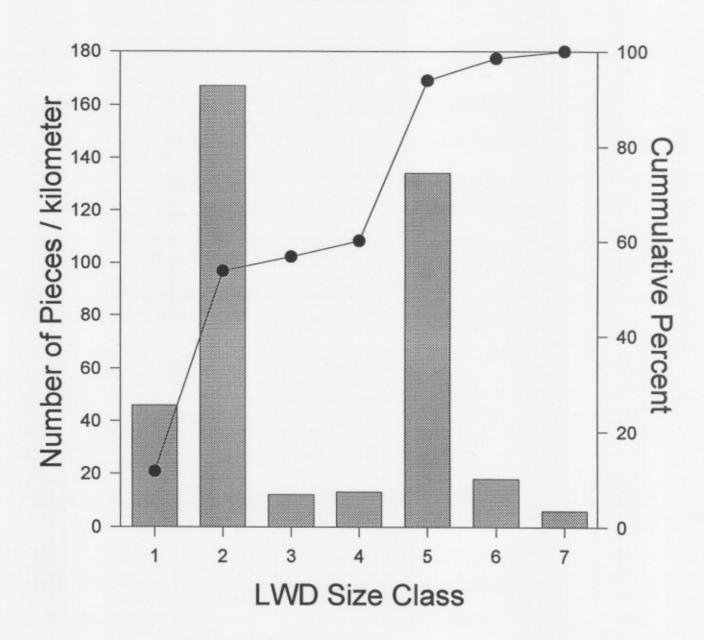




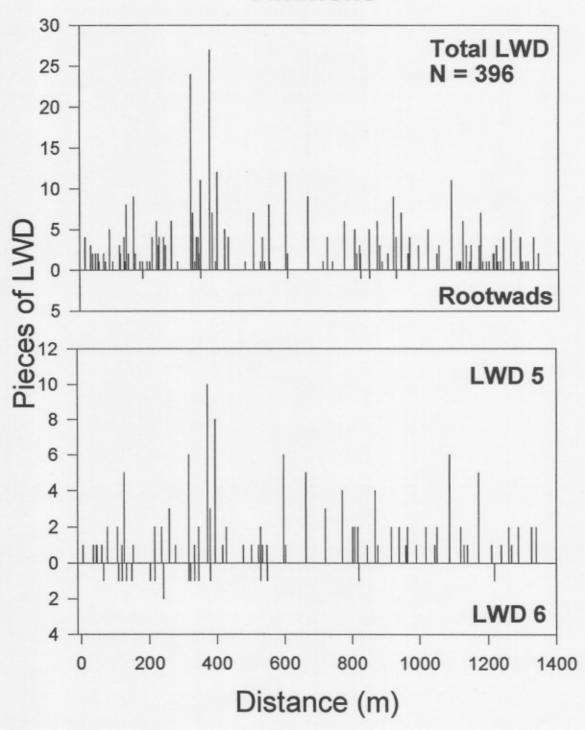


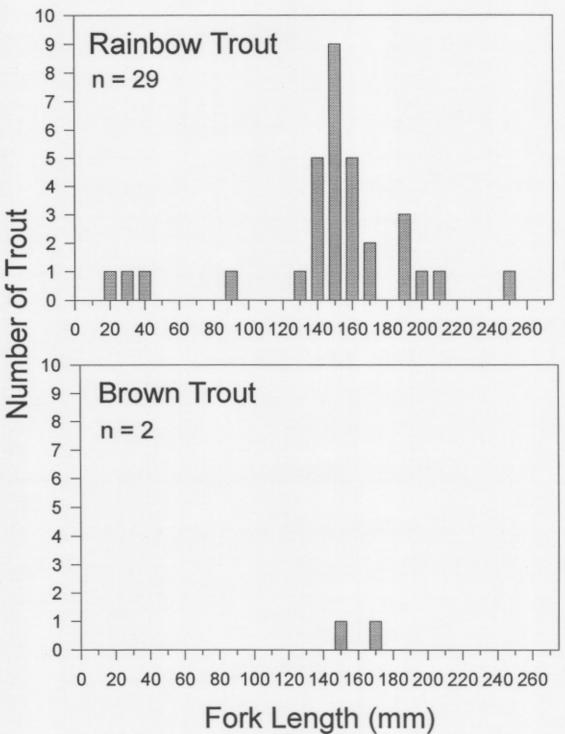


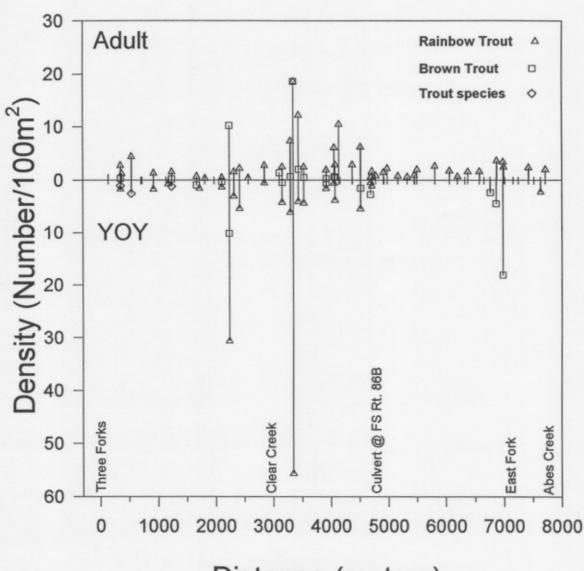




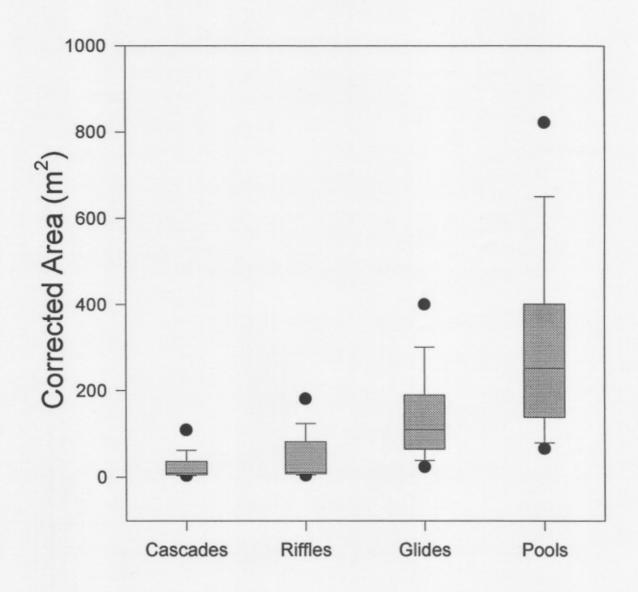
Overflow Creek Basin

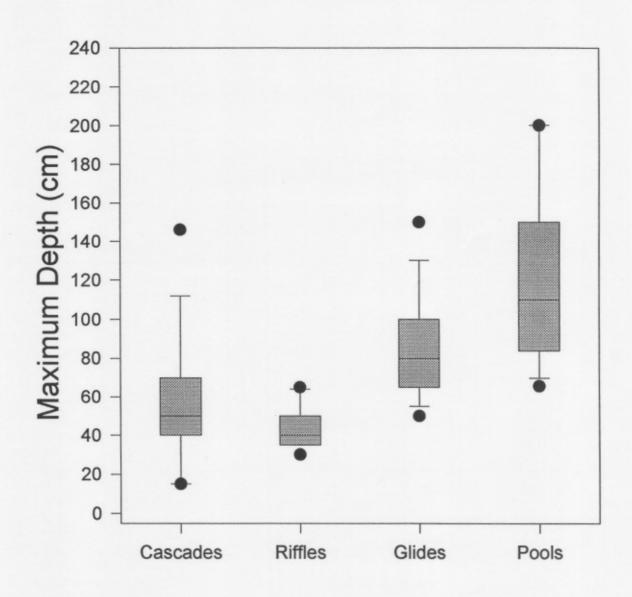


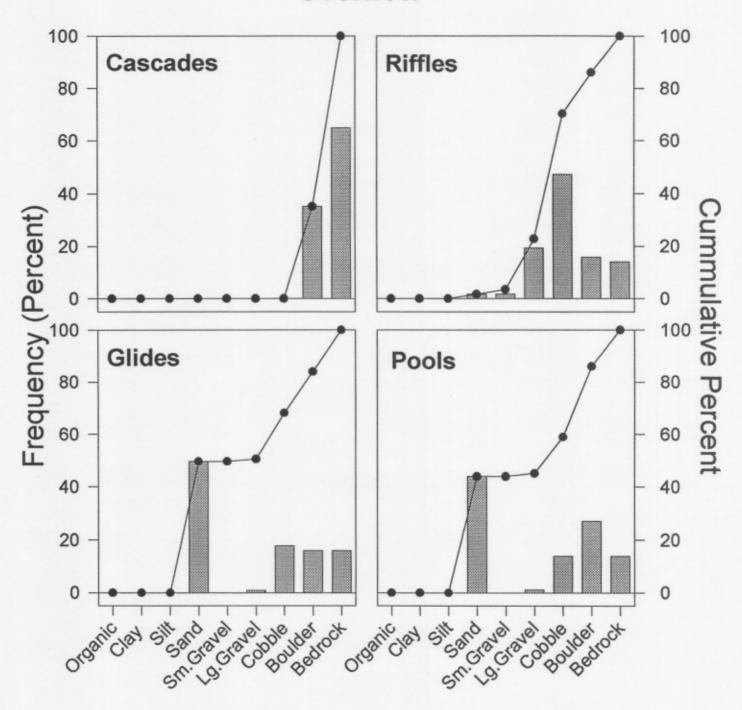


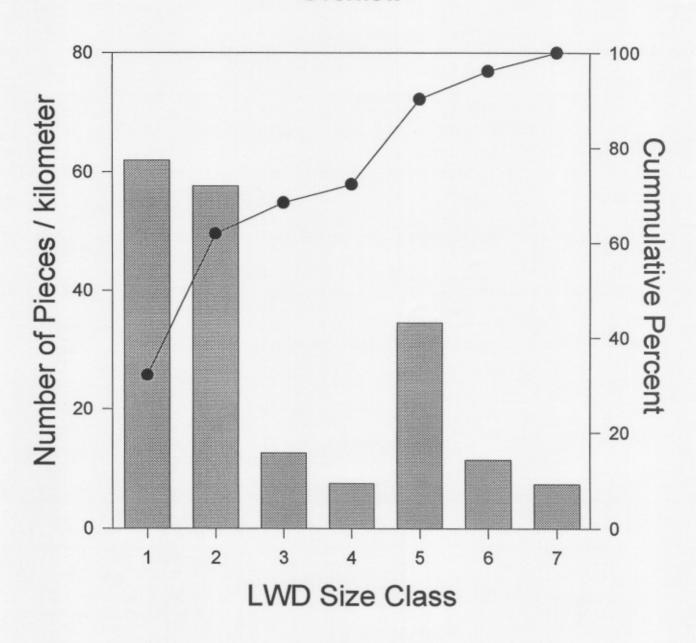


Distance (meters)









Overflow

